

## ***Living and Dying: A Poetic Exploration***

**Morning Poem  
By Mary Oliver**

Every morning  
the world  
is created.  
Under the orange

sticks of the sun  
the heaped  
ashes of the night  
turn into leaves again

and fasten themselves to the high branches  
---

and the ponds appear  
like black cloth  
on which are painted islands

of summer lilies.  
If it is your nature  
to be happy  
you will swim away along the soft trails

for hours, your imagination  
alighting everywhere.  
And if your spirit  
carries within it

the thorn  
that is heavier than lead ---  
if it's all you can do  
to keep on trudging ---

there is still  
somewhere deep within you  
a beast shouting that the earth  
is exactly what it wanted ---

each pond with its blazing lilies  
is a prayer heard and answered  
lavishly,  
every morning,

whether or not  
you have ever dared to be happy,

whether or not  
you have ever dared to pray.

**The Summer Day  
by Mary Oliver**

Who made the world?  
Who made the swan, and the black bear?  
Who made the grasshopper?  
This grasshopper, I mean--  
the one who has flung herself out of the  
grass,  
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,  
who is moving her jaws back and forth in-  
stead of up and down--  
who is gazing around with her enormous  
and complicated eyes.  
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thor-  
oughly washes her face.  
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats  
away.  
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.  
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall  
down  
into the grass, how to kneel in the grass,  
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll  
through the fields,  
which is what I have been doing all day.  
Tell me, what else should I have done?  
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?  
Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
With your one wild and precious life?

**First Fig  
by Edna St. Vincent Millay**

My candle burns at both ends;  
It will not last the night;  
But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends—  
It gives a lovely light!

**I Found a Dead Fox  
by Mary Oliver**

I found a dead fox  
beside the gravel road,  
curled inside the big

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iron wheel

of an old tractor  
that has been standing,  
for years,  
in the vines at the edge

of the road.  
I don't know  
what happened to it -  
when it came there

or why it lay down  
for good, settling  
its narrow chin  
on the rusted rim

of the iron wheel  
to look out  
over the fields,  
and that way died -

but I know  
this: its posture -  
of looking,  
to the last possible moment,

back into the world -  
made me want  
to sing something  
joyous and tender

about foxes.  
But what happened is this -  
when I began,  
when I crawled in

through the honeysuckle  
and lay down  
curling my long spine  
inside that cold wheel,

and touched the dead fox,  
and looked out  
into the wide fields,  
the fox

vanished.

There was only myself  
and the world,  
and it was I

who was leaving.  
And what could I sing  
then?  
Oh, beautiful world!

I just lay there  
and looked at it.  
And then it grew dark.  
That day was done with.

And then the stars stepped forth  
and held up their appointed  
fires -  
those hot, hard  
watchmen of the night.

**Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night**  
by Dylan Thomas

Do not go gentle into that good night,  
Old age should burn and rage at close of  
day;  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.  
Though wise men at their end know dark is  
right,  
Because their words had forked no lightning  
they  
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how  
bright  
Their frail deeds might have danced in a  
green bay,  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in  
flight,  
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,  
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blind-  
ing sight  
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be  
gay,

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Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,  
Curse, bless me now with your fierce tears, I  
pray.

Do not go gentle into that good night.  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

**The Layers**  
by Stanley Kunitz

I have walked through many lives,  
some of them my own,  
and I am not who I was,  
though some principle of being  
abides, from which I struggle  
not to stray.

When I look behind,  
as I am compelled to look  
before I can gather strength  
to proceed on my journey,  
I see the milestones dwindling  
toward the horizon  
and the slow fires trailing  
from the abandoned camp-sites,  
over which scavenger angels  
wheel on heavy wings.  
Oh, I have made myself a tribe  
out of my true affections,  
and my tribe is scattered!  
How shall the heart be reconciled  
to its feast of losses?

In a rising wind  
the manic dust of my friends,  
those who fell along the way,  
bitterly stings my face.  
Yet I turn, I turn,  
exulting somewhat,  
with my will intact to go  
wherever I need to go,  
and every stone on the road  
precious to me.  
In my darkest night,  
when the moon was covered  
and I roamed through wreckage,  
a nimbus-clouded voice

directed me:  
"Live in the layers,  
not on the litter."  
Though I lack the art  
to decipher it,  
no doubt the next chapter  
in my book of transformations  
is already written.  
I am not done with my changes.

**Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening**  
by Robert Frost

Whose woods these are I think I know;  
His house is in the village, though.  
He will not see me stopping here  
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer  
To stop without a farmhouse near  
Between the woods and frozen lake  
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake  
To ask if there is some mistake.  
The only other sound's the sweep  
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep  
But I have promises to keep  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.

**The Holy Surprise of Right Now**  
by Samuel Hazo

*If you can see you path laid out ahead of you  
step by step, then you know it's not your  
path.*

~Joseph Campbell

**Inside Brooks Brother's windows**  
it's July.

Sportshirts on sleek  
dummies speak in turquoise,  
polo, Bermuda, and golf.  
Outside, it's very much the first

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of March.

The sportshirts say  
today's tomorrow and the present  
tense be damned.

They tell me  
to forget that *here's* the only place  
we have.

They claim what matters  
most is never now but next.  
I've heard this argument before.  
It leaves me sentenced to the future,  
and that's much worse than being  
sentenced to the past.

The past  
at least was real just once . . .

What's  
called religion offers me the same.  
Life's never what I have  
but what's to come.

But where  
did Christ give heaven its address  
except within each one of us?  
So, anyone who claims it's not  
within but still ahead is contradicting  
God.

But why go on?  
I'm sick of learning to anticipate.  
I never want to live a second  
or a season or a heaven in advance  
of when I am and where.  
I need the salt and spices  
of uncertainty to know I'm still  
alive.

It makes me hunger  
for the feast I call today.  
It lets desire keep what  
satisfaction ends.

Lovers  
remember that the way that smoke  
remembers fire.

Between anticipation  
and the aggravation of suspense, I  
choose  
suspense.

I choose desire.

Life Is Fine  
by Langston Hughes

I went down to the river,  
I set down on the bank.  
I tried to think but couldn't,  
So I jumped in and sank.  
I came up once and hollered!  
I came up twice and cried!  
If that water hadn't a-been so cold  
I might've sunk and died.  
But it was Cold in that water! It was cold!  
I took the elevator  
Sixteen floors above the ground.  
I thought about my baby  
And thought I would jump down.  
I stood there and I hollered!  
I stood there and I cried!  
If it hadn't a-been so high  
I might've jumped and died.  
But it was High up there! It was high!  
So since I'm still here livin',  
I guess I will live on.  
I could've died for love--  
But for livin' I was born  
Though you may hear me holler,  
And you may see me cry--  
I'll be dogged, sweet baby,  
If you gonna see me die.  
Life is fine! Fine as wine! Life is fine!

One Or Two Things (excerpt)  
by Mary Oliver

The god of dirt  
came up to me many times and said  
so many wise and delectable things; I lay  
on the grass listening  
to his dog voice,  
crow voice,  
frog voice; now  
he said, and now,  
and never once mentioned forever,

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**In Blackwater Woods  
by Mary Oliver**

**Look, the trees  
are turning  
their own bodies  
into pillars**

**of light,  
are giving off the rich  
fragrance of cinnamon  
and fulfillment,  
the long tapers  
of cattails  
are bursting and floating away over  
the blue shoulders**

**of the ponds,  
and every pond,  
no matter what its  
name is, is**

**nameless now.  
Every year  
everything  
I have ever learned**

**in my lifetime  
leads back to this: the fires  
and the black river of loss  
whose other side**

**is salvation,  
whose meaning  
none of us will ever know.  
To live in this world**

**you must be able  
to do three things:  
to love what is mortal;  
to hold it**

**against your bones knowing  
your own life depends on it;  
and, when the time comes to let go,  
to let go.**

**Wild Geese  
by Mary Oliver**

**You do not have to be good.  
You do not have to walk on your knees  
for a hundred miles through the desert re-  
penting.  
You only have to let the soft animal of your  
body  
love what it loves.  
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell  
you mine.  
Meanwhile the world goes on.  
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of  
the rain  
are moving across the landscapes,  
over the prairies and the deep trees,  
the mountains and the rivers.  
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean  
blue air,  
are heading home again.  
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,  
the world offers itself to your imagination,  
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and  
exciting  
over and over announcing your place  
in the family of things.**

**No Man is an Island, excerpt  
by John Donne**

**No man is an island,  
Entire of itself.  
Each is a piece of the continent,  
A part of the main.  
If a clod be washed away by the sea,  
Europe is the less.  
As well as if a promontory were.  
As well as if a manor of thine own  
Or of thine friend's were.  
Each man's death diminishes me,  
For I am involved in mankind.  
Therefore, send not to know  
For whom the bell tolls,**

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It tolls for thee.

and each body a lion of courage, and something precious to the earth.

When it's over, I want to say all my life I was a bride married to amazement. I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder if I have made of my life something particular, and real.

**When Death Comes**  
by Mary Oliver

I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,  
or full of argument.

When death comes  
like the hungry bear in autumn;  
when death comes and takes all the bright  
coins from his purse

I don't want to end up simply having visited  
this world.

to buy me, and snaps the purse shut;  
when death comes  
like the measles-pox

when death comes  
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,

I want to step through the door full of curiosity,  
wondering:  
what is it going to be like, that cottage of  
darkness?

And therefore I look upon everything  
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,  
and I look upon time as no more than an  
idea,  
and I consider eternity as another possibility,

and I think of each life as a flower, as common  
as a field daisy, and as singular,

and each name a comfortable music in the  
mouth,  
tending, as all music does, toward silence,